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SUBJECT: ADDRESSING THE AI THREAT IN TURKEY

Ref: State 153802

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1. (SBU) Summary. Post delivered referenced talking points to officials at the Turkish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA). MARA officials are very concerned that Avian Influenza could spread to Turkey primarily by wild bird populations migrating from Russia. Officials welcomed any exchange of information on the issue however inter-agency relations may inhibit a coordinated effort by the Turkish government to address any outbreak. End Summary.

Welcomed Initiative

2. (SBU) On August 19, AgCounselor delivered talking points regarding highly pathogenic H5N1 Avian Influenza (AI) to Deputy Under Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Nebi Celik. DUS/Celik indicated that the Ministry was trying to follow the AI outbreak in Russia and Central Asia and were extremely concerned with the spread of the disease given Turkey's eastern borders. Celik stated that the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs had the primary responsibility for tracking the disease. Celik was extremely interested in any information we could provide regarding the outbreak particularly with the situation in Russia and Kazakhstan. Celik stated that they would provide information on any developments in Turkey.

Turkey's Poultry Sector - Varied and Vulnerable

3. (U) Turkey's commercial poultry sector is comprised of several large companies. However, about 40 percent of Turkey's population still lives in rural areas with many depending on subsistence farming including some poultry and egg production. The average farm size in Turkey is only 8 hectares with each farm invariably keeping poultry (ducks, chickens, geese, turkeys) for household consumption. More often than not, the poultry is being raised in open areas, where they can come into contact with wild fowl. It is not unusual to see chickens along the side of the road in rural areas.

Banning Live Poultry Imports from Russia

4. (U) Turkey does not permit any commercial imports of poultry meat although imports of breeding stock including day old chicks are permitted. In August, Turkey banned all imports of live poultry from Russia. Imports of live poultry from countries in Central Asia are not permitted.

GOT Measures

5. (SBU) According to the Celik, the Under Secretary of Agriculture, Hamit Ogut, is the primary contact for the AI situation. Celik requested that any information regarding AI be sent to the Under Secretary with copies to other members of the Ministry. He noted that the European Union and Turkey will be doing a joint emergency exercise in the eastern part of Turkey to combat a possible outbreak of AI.

6. (SBU) Further discussions with MARA representatives revealed that Turkish government has an established emergency action plan (EAP) to deal with AI and perhaps all types of infectious animal diseases. The EAP is an internal document and we were unable to obtain a copy.

For AI, MARA, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Forestry all share some responsibility for this issue. Forestry has responsibility for migratory and wild bird populations while Health focuses on human illness. According to our contact, instructions have been provided to health care workers to report any unusual human illnesses and for the poultry industry to report any unusual bird illnesses or deaths. In addition, there be an additional workshop/exercise in Bondurma in September or October to determine the ability of the emergency response system.

Some Outstanding Issues Remain

17. (SBU) Despite assurances by Ministry officials that a system is in place to address any problems, some issues remain. First, there has been no indication that the Ministry is providing any information to small landowners, who maintain small flocks and who are most likely to come into contact with wild migrating fowl. Second, relations between the Turkish ministries are not as good as they should be. MARA officials indicated that they are the lead agency on the illness without acknowledging the role of Health or Forestry. It is not clear how much information is being shared among ministries.

18. (SBU) During discussions with one MARA official, post learned that the government has not addressed the issue of paying for culling of birds. Apparently, no funds have been allocated either to pay for culling, disposing of carcasses, or for compensating farmers.

Comment: Follow-up

19. (SBU) Post will follow up during the next several weeks with officials from the Ministries of Health and Forestry as well as the poultry industry for further information. In addition, we will meet with EU officials to determine the results of their joint exercise. End Comment.

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